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ABSTRACT

Feminist critiques of psychology have pointed to the strong tendency throughout the history of the discipline for researchers to assume one of two standards for human behavior: non-human primates, and men, more specifically, white, privileged men who often are college sophomores. Feminist scientists in other fields, as well as feminist psychologists, have criticized this male standard and offered suggestions for a women-centered psychology of women as an alternate social construction. Much of the research in the psychology of women has focused on comparisons of men as a group to women as a group. This dichotomy has produced a literature of apparent gender differences, often using men as the control group, and frequently suggesting that women are deficient relative to that control. In addition to the value judgments that arise from these comparisons, an assumption that underlies them is that women and men each are unified, homogeneous groups. Such an assumption ignores any diversity that exists within each group often by narrowly defining women as white, middle class, heterosexual, physically able and young. Ultimately this approach simply may replace the old, white, privileged male norm with a similarly limited white, privileged female norm. In a society that marginalizes the nonprivileged, what is meant by "achievement" must be redefined and a variety of achievements must be valued if a diverse group of models is to be provided. (ABL)

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Danger: Viewing White, Privileged Women as Normative

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Abstract

Danger: Viewing White, Privileged Women as Normative

The purpose of this presentation is to contribute to thinking within the psychology of women about how to best frame a woman-centered psychology of women that represents the richness and diversity of women's experiences. The development of the psychology of women resulted from a critical analysis of mainstream psychology's androcentric bias. This bias, its consequences, and a feminist response to it will be examined. From an understanding of this history, we will go on to explore the dangers of the current tendency of the psychology of women to become biased toward white, privileged women and offer ideas to avoid this.

Danger: Viewing White, Privileged Women as Normative

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The purpose of the present paper is to contribute to thinking within the psychology of women about how to best frame a woman-centered psychology of women that represents the richness and diversity of women's experiences. The development of the psychology of women itself resulted from a critical analysis of mainstream psychology's androcentric bias. We start with an examination of this bias, its consequences, and the feminist response to it. We then explore the potential development of an equally disastrous bias in the psychology of women itself--the possible creation of a white, privileged, female norm.

Feminist critiques of psychology have pointed to the strong tendency throughout the history of the discipline for researchers to assume one of two standards for human behavior: nonhuman primates (Weisstein, 1971) and men, more specifically, white, privileged men who often are college sophomores (e.g., Gilligan, 1979; Parlee, 1975, 1979, 1981; Sherif, 1979). At times the latter has been regarded as a universal standard, so much so that only men were studied under the guise of methodological control, although findings were generalized to all human beings. This strategy simply excluded women and lower-status others from participation in psychological study, but not from psychological analysis.

In other instances, the male norm provided the baseline against which women (and other lower-status groups) were compared. This practice of contrasting women and men fostered conclusions that exaggerated sex and gender differences, almost always to the detriment of women. The consequences

then of this androcentric bias were faulty overgeneralizations, exaggerations of difference, and deficient evaluations of women.

Feminist scientists in other fields (e.g., Bleir, 1984; Keller, 1985) as well as feminist psychologists (e.g., Lott, 1985; Unger 1983, 1985; Wallston & Grady, 1985; Wittig, 1985) have criticized this male standard or norm and offered suggestions for a women-centered psychology of women as an alternate social construction (Bohan, 1990). Crawford and Marecek (1989) discuss four conceptual frameworks that psychologists have used to bring women into the field: (a) "exceptional women" which "re-places" women in psychology's history; (b) "women as problem or anomaly" which seeks to "explain" gender differences in terms of traditional gender-role socialization and gender-role-related conflicts; (c) "the psychology of gender" which seeks to examine gender as an ongoing social process, rather than as a social outcome; and (d) "transformation" which calls for a psychology of women that will critique and thus transform traditional psychology. Each of these frameworks co-exists and even interacts in the psychology of women.

Although the psychology of women has and continues to re-place women in psychology's history and in current research, we need to take a critical look at how this is happening. We might learn from Women's Studies which developed throughout the 1970s in response to the androcentric orientation of much of scholarly work conducted within academe. The basic tenet of these programs was to foster a woman-centered view of scholarship that focused on the lives, experiences, and contributions of women (Boxer, 1982). The hope was that such scholarship eventually would transform the curriculum so that women and women's experiences would become so intertwined with men and men's experiences that a whole new perspective, transcending that of both women and men, would result (Boxer, 1982). In the 1990s, Women's Studies scholars are

becoming increasingly aware of a basic flaw in this goal: just as there is no singular male experience, there is no one experience or characterization that can be indiscriminately applied to the experiences of all women (Spelman, 1988). The result has been a growing interest in issues of diversity or difference, usually focusing on class, sexual orientation, race, and role (Brown, 1989; Crosby, 1987; Culley & Butler, 1984; Fine, 1989; Lykes, 1989; Stewart & Malley, 1988).

Much of the research in the psychology of women has focused on comparisons of men as a group to women as a group (Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Kahn & Yoder, 1989). As we have seen, this dichotomy has produced a literature of apparent gender differences, often using men as the baseline or control group, and frequently suggesting that women are deficient relative to that control. In addition to the value judgments that arise from these comparisons, an assumption that underlies them is that women and men each are unified, homogeneous groups. Such an assumption ignores any diversity that exists within each group often by narrowly defining women as white (Amaro & Russo, 1987; Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990), middle class (Bramel & Friend, 1981; Rubin,1976), heterosexual (Brown, 1989; Kitzinger, 1987), physically able (Fine & Asch, 1988), and young (Barnett & Baruch, 1978). Ultimately this approach simply may replace the old white, privileged male norm with an similarly limited white, privileged female norm.

There is some suggestion that this is taking place within the psychology of women (Brown, Goodwin, Hall, & Jackson-Lowman, 1985). First, there is some evidence that the preponderance of research on gender excludes women of color as subjects (Fine, 1985), although this may be changing somewhat (Fine & Gordon, 1989). Second, much of the research in which women of color participate compares their responses to those of white women or men of color. Parallel "control" groups are used to study class, sexual orientation, and so on. This

dependency on comparison groups, so central to our training in experimental methods, may lead to the same consequences as earlier comparisons of women and men: exaggerations of difference and evaluations of deficiency. We are not suggesting that diversity be ignored, but rather that commonalties be understood as well. Furthermore, when group differences are found, history warns us to be wary of accompanying value judgments.

We will end our discussion by considering how the four frameworks Crawford and Marecek (1989) propose to re-place women in a formerly androcentric psychology might be used to help the psychology of women recognize nonprivileged women in our history, our research, and our interpretations.

For example, Crawford and Marecek (1989) suggested that we re-write our history of psychology to include women. Extending this to our history of the psychology of women, we need to expose a diversity of exceptional women, not just white, privileged women. A variety of models or "herstories" would be provided. However, in a society that marginalizes the nonprivileged, we must redefine what is meant by "achievement" and value a variety of achievements if we are to provide a diverse group of models. Without such a transformation of values, we will continue to reinforce the status quo (Kahn & Yoder, 1989; Prilleltensky, 1989) and give people false hope that they can succeed in a society that handicaps them. Throughout our discussion, we will stress the need to go beyond simply accommodating diversity to a transformation of our history, thinking, and methods.

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